

GLITCHES

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MEYER



TOR·COM 

MARISSA MEYER

Glitches

illustration by

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“Are you ready to meet your new family?”

She tore her gaze away from the window, where snow was heaped up on bamboo fences and a squat android was clearing a path through the slush, and looked at the man seated opposite her. Though he'd been kind to her throughout their trip, two full days of being passed between a hover, a maglev train, two passenger ships, and yet another hover, he still had a nervous smile that made her fidget.

Plus, she kept forgetting his name.

“I don't remember the old family,” she said, adjusting her heavy left leg so that it didn't stick out quite so far between their seats.

His lips twisted awkwardly into an expression that was probably meant to be reassuring, and this ended their conversation. His attention fell down to a device he never stopped looking at, with a screen that cast a greenish glow over his face. He wasn't a very old man, but his eyes always seemed tired and his clothes didn't fit him right. Though he'd been clean-cut when he first came to claim her, he was now in need of a razor.

She returned her gaze to the snow-covered street. The suburb struck her as crowded and confused. A series of short one-story shacks would be followed by a mansion with a frozen water fountain in its courtyard and red-tiled roofs. After that, a series of clustered town houses and maybe a run-down apartment complex, before more tiny shacks took over. It all looked like someone had taken every kind of residence they could think of and spilled them across a grid of roads, not caring where anything landed.

She suspected that her new home wasn't anything like the rolling farmland they'd left behind in Europe, but she'd

been in such a foggy-brained daze at the time that she couldn't remember much of anything before the train ride. Except that it had been snowing there, too. She was already sick of the snow and the cold. They made her bones ache where her fleshy parts were connected to her steel prosthetics.

She swiveled her gaze back toward the man seated across from her. "Are we almost there?"

He nodded without looking up. "Almost, Cinder."

Enfolding her fingers around the scar tissue on her wrist, she waited, hoping he would say something else to ease her nerves, but he didn't seem the type to notice anyone's anxiety above his own. She imagined calling him *Dad*, but the word was laughably unfamiliar, even inside her head. She couldn't even compare him with her real father, as her memory had been reduced to a blank slate during the intrusive surgeries and all she had left of her parents was their sterile identity profiles, with plain photos that held no recognition and a tag at the top labeling them as **DECEASED**. They'd been killed in the hover crash that had also claimed her leg and hand.

As confirmed by all official records, there was no one else. Cinder's grandparents were also dead. She had no siblings. No aunts or uncles or friends—at least, none willing to claim her. Perhaps there wasn't a human being in all of Europe who would have taken her in, and that's why they'd had to search as far as New Beijing before they found her a replacement family.

She squinted, straining to remember who *they* were. The faceless people who had pulled her from the wreckage and turned her into *this*. Doctors and surgeons, no doubt. Scientists. Programmers. There must have been a social worker involved, but she couldn't recall for sure. Her memory gave her only dizzy glimpses of the French countryside and this stranger sitting across from her, entranced by the device in his hands.

Her new stepfather.

The hover began to slow, drifting toward the curb. Its nose hit a snowbank and it came to a sudden shuddering stop. Cinder grabbed the bar overhead, but the hover had already settled down, slightly off-kilter in the packed snow.

"Here we are," said the man, eyes twinkling as the hover door slid open.

She stayed plastered to her seat, her hand still gripping the bar, as a gust of icy wind swirled around them. They'd arrived at one of the tiny shack houses, one with peeling paint and a gutter that hung loose beneath the weight of the snow. Still, it was a sweet little house, all white with a red roof and enough dead branches sticking up from the ground that Cinder could almost imagine a garden come springtime.

The man paid the hover with a swipe of his wrist, then stepped out onto a pathway that had been plowed down to a sheet of ice. The door to the house opened before he'd taken a step and two girls about Cinder's own age came barreling down the front steps, squealing. The man crouched down on the pathway, holding out his arms as the girls launched themselves into him.

From her place inside the hover, Cinder heard the man laugh for the first time.

A woman appeared inside the doorway, belting a quilted robe around her waist. "Girls, don't suffocate your father. He's had a long trip."

"Don't listen to your mother, just this once. You can suffocate me all you like." He kissed his daughters on the tops of their heads, then stood, keeping a firm grip on their hands. "Would you like to meet your new sister?" he asked, turning back to face the hover. He seemed surprised at the empty pathway behind him. "Come on out, Cinder."

She shivered and pried her hand away from the safety bar. Sliding toward the door, she tried to be graceful stepping out onto the curb, but the distance to the ground

was shorter than she'd expected and her heavy leg was inflexible as it crunched through the compact ice. She cried out and stumbled, barely catching herself on the hover's doorframe.

The man hurried back toward her, holding her up as well as he could by the arm, one hand gripping her metal fingers. "It's all right, perfectly natural. Your muscles are weak right now, and it will take time for your wiring to fully integrate with your nervous system."

Cinder stared hard at the ground, shivering both from cold and embarrassment. She couldn't help finding irony in the man's words, though she dared not laugh at them—what did integrated wiring have to do with being perfectly natural?

"Cinder," the man continued, coaxing her forward, "this is my eldest daughter, Pearl, and my youngest, Peony. And that is their lovely mother, Adri. Your new stepmother."

She peered up at his two daughters from behind a curtain of fine brown hair.

They were both staring openly at her metal hand.

Cinder tried to shrink away, but then the youngest girl, Peony, asked, "Did it hurt when they put it on?"

Steady on her feet again, Cinder pried her hand out of the man's hold and tucked it against her side. "I don't remember."

"She was unconscious for the surgeries, Peony," said the man.

"Can I touch it?" she asked, her hand already inching forward.

"That's enough, Garan. People are watching."

Cinder jumped at the shrill voice, but when she looked up, her "stepmother" was not looking at them, but at the house across the street.

Garan. That was the man's name. Cinder committed it to memory as she followed Adri's gaze and saw a man staring at her through his front window.

"It's freezing out here," said Adri. "Pearl, go find the android and have her bring in your father's luggage. Peony, you can show Cinder to her room."

"You mean *my* room," said Pearl, her lip curling as she began to shuffle back toward the house. "I'm the oldest. I shouldn't have to share with Peony."

To Cinder's surprise, the younger girl turned and latched on to her arm, tugging her forward. She nearly slipped on the ice and would have been embarrassed again, except she noticed that Peony's feet were slipping around too as she pulled Cinder ahead. "Pearl can take the room," she said. "I don't mind sharing with Cinder."

Adri's face was taut as she looked down at their intertwined elbows. "Don't argue with me, either of you."

Condensation sprang up on Cinder's steel hand as she went from the chilled air to the house's warm entryway, but Peony didn't seem to notice as she led her toward the back of the house.

"I don't know why Pearl's upset," she said, shouldering open a door. "This is the smallest room in the house. Our bedroom is much nicer." Releasing Cinder, she went to pull open the blinds on the single small window. "But look, you can see the neighbor's cherry tree. It's really pretty when it blooms."

Cinder didn't follow her to the window, instead casting her gaze around the room. It seemed small, but it was larger than the sleeper car on the maglev train and she had no prior bedrooms to compare it with. A mattress sat in the corner with blankets tucked neatly around its sides, and a small dresser stood empty on the nearest wall.

"Pearl used to have a netscreen in here, but Mom moved it into the kitchen. You can come watch mine whenever you want to, though. Do you like *Nightmare Island*? It's my favorite drama."

"Nightmare Island?" No sooner had Cinder said it than her brain started streaming data across her vision. **A**

popular drama aimed at teenage girls that includes a cast of thirty-six young celebrities who are caught up in lies, betrayal, romance, and the scheme of a crazed scientist who—

“Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of it!”

Cinder scrunched her shoulders beside her ears. “I’ve heard of it,” she said, blinking the data away. She wondered if there was a way to get her brain to stop doing that every time she heard an unfamiliar phrase. It had been happening almost nonstop since she’d woken up from the surgery.

“That’s the show with the crazed scientist, right? I’ve never seen it, though.”

Peony looked relieved. “That’s fine, I have a subscription to the whole feed. We’ll watch it together.” She bounced on her feet and Cinder had to tear her gaze away from the girl’s excitement. Her gaze landed on a box half-tucked behind the door. A small pronged hand was hanging over the edge.

“What’s this?” she said, leaning forward. She kept her hands locked behind her back.

“Oh, that’s Iko.” Abandoning the window, Peony crouched down and scooted the box out from the wall. It was filled with random android parts all jumbled together—the spherical body took up most of the space, along with a glossy white head, a sensor lens, a clear bag filled with screws and program chips. “She had some sort of glitch in her personality chip and Mom heard that she could get more money for her if she sold her off in pieces rather than as a whole, but nobody wanted them. Now she just sits here, in a box.”

Cinder shuddered, wondering how common glitches were in androids. Or cyborgs.

“I really liked Iko when she was working. She was a lot more fun than that boring garden android.” Peony picked up the thin metal arm with the three prongs and held it up so that the fingers clicked together. “We used to play dress-up

together.” Her eyes lit up. “Hey, do *you* like playing dress-up?”

Adri appeared in the doorway just as Cinder’s brain was informing her that “dress-up” was ***a game often played by children in which costumes or adult clothes are used to aid in the process of imagination...***

Obviously, she thought, sending the message away.

“Well, Cinder?” said Adri, tightening her robe’s belt again and surveying the small room with a pinched face. “Garan told me you wouldn’t want for much. I hope this meets your expectations?”

She looked around again, at the bed, the dresser, the branches that would someday bloom in the neighbor’s yard. “Yes, thank you.”

Adri rubbed her hands together. “Good. I hope you’ll let me know if you need anything. We’re glad to share our home with you, knowing what you’ve been through.”

Cinder licked her lips, thinking to say thank you again, but then a small orange light flickered in her optobionics and she found herself frowning. This was something new and she had no idea what it meant.

Maybe it was a sign of a brain malfunction. Maybe this was a glitch.

“Come along, Peony,” said Adri, stepping back into the hall. “I could use some help in the kitchen.”

“But Mom, Cinder and I were going to—”

“*Now*, Peony.”

Scowling, Peony thrust the android arm into Cinder’s hand and followed after her mother.

Cinder held up the limb and shook it at their backs, making the lifeless fingers wave goodbye.

Six nights after she’d arrived at her new home, Cinder awoke on fire. She cried out, tumbling off the mattress and landing

in a heap with a blanket wrapped like a tourniquet around her bionic leg. She lay gasping for a minute, rubbing her hands over her arms to try and smother the flames until she finally realized that they weren't real.

A warning about escalating temperatures flashed in her gaze and she forced herself to lie still long enough to dismiss it from her vision. Her skin was clammy, beads of sweat dripping back into her hair. Even her metal limbs felt warm to the touch.

When her breathing was under control, she pulled herself up onto weak legs and hobbled to the window, thrusting it open and drinking in the winter air. The snow had started to melt, turning into slush in the daytime before hardening into glistening ice at night. Cinder stood for a moment, reveling in the frosty air on her skin and entranced by how a nearly full moon turned the world ghostly yellow. She tried to remember the nightmare, but her memory gave her only fire and, after a minute, the sensation of sandpaper in her mouth.

Shutting the window, she crept toward her bedroom door, careful not to trip on the bag of secondhand clothes Pearl had begrudgingly given to her the day before after her father had lectured her about charity.

She heard Adri's voice before she reached the kitchen and paused, one hand balancing her on the wall as her body threatened to tip toward its heavier left side.

As she strained to hear, Adri's voice grew steadily louder, and Cinder realized with a jolt that Adri wasn't *speaking* louder, but rather something in her own head was adjusting the volume on her hearing. She rubbed her palm against her ear, feeling like there was a bug in it.

"Four months, Garan," Adri said. "We're behind by four months and Suki-jiě has already threatened to start auctioning off our things if we don't pay her soon."

"She's not going to auction off our things," said Garan, his voice a strange combination of soothing and strained.

Garan's voice had already become unfamiliar to Cinder's ear. He spent his days out in a one-room shed behind the house, "tinkering," Peony said, though she didn't seem to know what exactly he was tinkering with. He came in to join his family for meals, but hardly ever talked and Cinder wondered how much he heard, either. His expression always suggested his mind was very far away.

"Why *shouldn't* she sell off our things? I'm sure I would in her place!" Adri said. "Whenever I have to leave the house, I come home wondering if this will be the day our things are gone and our locks are changed. We can't keep living on her hospitality."

"It's going to be all right, love. Our luck is changing."

"Our luck!" Adri's voice spiked in Cinder's ear and she flinched at the shrillness, quickly urging the volume to descend again. It obeyed her command, through sheer willpower. She held her breath, wondering what other secrets her brain was keeping from her.

"*How* is our luck changing? Because you won a silver ribbon at that fair in Sydney last month? Your stupid awards aren't going to keep food on this table, and now you've brought home one more mouth—and a *cyborg* at that!"

"We talked about this..."

"No, *you* talked about this. I want to support you, Garan, but these schemes of yours are going to cost us everything. We have our own girls to think about. I can't even afford new shoes for Pearl and now there's this creature in the house who's going to need...what? A new *foot* every six months?"

Shriveling against the wall, Cinder glanced down at her metal foot, the toes looking awkward and huge beside the fleshy ones—the ones with bone and skin and toenails.

"Of course not. She'll be fine for a year or two," said Garan.

Adri stifled a hysterical laugh.

"And her leg and fingers can be adjusted as she grows," Garan continued. "We shouldn't need replacements for

those until she reaches adulthood.”

Cinder lifted her hand into the faint light coming down the hallway, inspecting the joints. She hadn’t noticed how the knuckles were fitted together before, the digits nestled inside each other. So this hand could grow, just like her human hand did.

Because she would be stuck with these limbs forever. She would be cyborg forever.

“Well how *comforting*,” said Adri. “I’m glad to see you’ve given this so much thought.”

“Have faith, love.”

Cinder heard a chair being pushed back and backed up into the hallway, but all that followed was the sound of running water from the faucet. She pressed her fingers over her mouth, trying to feel the water through psychokinesis, but even *her* brain couldn’t quench her thirst on sound alone.

“I have something special to reveal at the Tokyo Fair in March,” Garan said. “It’s going to change everything. In the meantime, you must be patient with the child. She only wants to belong here. Perhaps she can help you with the housework, until we can get that android replaced?”

Adri scoffed. “Help me? What can she do, dragging that monstrosity around?”

Cinder cringed. She heard a cup being set down, then a kiss. “Give her a chance. Maybe she’ll surprise you.”

She ducked away at the first hint of a footstep, creeping back into her room and shutting the door. She felt that she could have wept from thirst, but her eyes stayed as dry as her tongue.

“Here, you put on the green one,” said Peony, tossing a bundle of green and gold silk into Cinder’s arms. She barely caught it, the thin material slipping like water over her

hands. "We don't have any real ball gowns, but these are just as pretty. This is my favorite." Peony held up another garment, a swath of purple and red fabric decorated with soaring cranes. She strung her bony arms through the enormous sleeves and pulled the material tight around her waist, holding it in place while she dug through the pile of clothes for a long silver sash and belted it around her middle. "Aren't they beautiful?"

Cinder nodded uncertainly—although the silk kimonos were perhaps the finest things she'd ever felt, Peony looked ridiculous in hers. The hem of the gown dragged a foot on the floor, the sleeves dangled almost to her knees, and street clothes still peeked through at her neck and wrists, ruining the illusion. It almost looked like the gown was trying to eat her.

"Well put yours on!" said Peony. "Here, this is the sash I usually put with that one." She pulled out a black and violet band.

Cinder tentatively stuck her hands into the sleeves, taking extra care that no screws or joints caught the fine material. "Won't Adri be mad?"

"Pearl and I play dress-up all the time," said Peony, looping the sash around Cinder's waist. "And how are we supposed to go to the ball if we don't have any beautiful dresses to wear?"

Cinder raised her arms, shaking the sleeves back. "I don't think my hand goes with this one."

Peony laughed, though Cinder hadn't meant it to be funny. Peony seemed to find amusement with almost everything she said.

"Just pretend you're wearing gloves," said Peony. "Then no one will know." Grabbing Cinder by the hand, she pulled her across the hall and into the bathroom so they could see themselves in the mirror. Cinder looked no less absurd than Peony, with her fine, mousy hair hanging limp past her

shoulders and awkward metal fingers poking out of the left sleeve.

“Perfect,” said Peony, beaming. “Now we’re at the ball. Iko used to always be the prince, but I guess we’ll have to pretend.”

“What ball?”

Peony stared back at her in the mirror as if Cinder had just sprouted a metal tail. “The ball for the peace festival! It’s this huge event we have every year—the festival is down in the city center and then in the evening they have the ball up at the palace. I’ve never gone for real, but Pearl will be thirteen next year so she’ll get to go for the first time.” She sighed and spun out into the hallway. Cinder followed, her walking made even more cumbersome than usual with the kimono trailing on the ground.

“When I go for the first time, I want a purple dress with a skirt so big I can hardly fit through the door.”

“That sounds uncomfortable.”

Peony wrinkled her nose. “Well it has to be spectacular, or else Prince Kai won’t notice me, and then what’s the point?”

Cinder was almost hesitant to ask as she followed flouncing Peony back into her bedroom—“Who’s Prince Kai?”

Peony spun toward her so fast, she tripped on the skirts of Adri’s kimono and fell, screaming, onto her bed. “*Who’s Prince Kai?*” she yelled, struggling to sit back up. “Only my future husband! Honestly, don’t girls in Europe know about him?”

Cinder teetered between her two feet, unable to answer the question. After twelve whole days living with Peony and her family, she already had more memories of the Eastern Commonwealth than she had of Europe. She hadn’t the faintest idea what—or who—the girls in Europe obsessed over.

“Here,” said Peony, scrambling across her messy blankets and grabbing a portscreen off the nightstand. “He’s my

greeter.”

She turned the screen on and a boy’s voice said, “Hello, Peony.” Cinder shuffled forward and took the small device from her. The screen showed a boy of twelve or thirteen years old wearing a tailored suit that seemed ironic with his shaggy black hair. He was waving at someone—Cinder guessed the photo was from some sort of press event.

“Isn’t he gorgeous?” said Peony. “Every night I tie a red string around my finger and say his name five times because this girl in my class told me that will tie our destinies together. I know he’s my soul mate.”

Cinder listed her head, still staring at the boy. Her optobionics were scanning him, finding the picture in some database in her head, and, this time, she expected the stream of text that began to filter through her brain. His ID number, his birth date, his full name and title. Prince Kaito, Crown Prince of the Eastern Commonwealth.

“His arms are too long for his body,” she said after a while, finally picking up on what didn’t feel right about the picture. “They’re not proportionate.”

“What are you talking about?” Peony snatched the port away and stared at it for a minute before tossing it onto her pillow. “Honestly, who cares about his arms?”

Cinder shrugged, unable to smother a slight grin. “I was only saying.”

Harrumphing, Peony swung her legs around and hopped off the bed. “Fine, whatever. Our hover is here. We’d better get going or we’ll be late for the ball, where *I* am going to dance with His Imperial Highness, and *you* can dance with whoever you would like to. Maybe another prince. We should make one up for you. Do you want Prince Kai to have a brother?”

“What are you two doing?”

Cinder spun around. Adri was looming in the doorway—again her footsteps had gone unnoticed and Cinder was

beginning to wonder if Adri was really a ghost that floated through the hallways rather than walked.

“We’re going to the ball!” Peony said.

Adri’s face flushed as her gaze dropped down the silk kimono hanging off Cinder’s shoulders. “Take that off this instant!”

Shrinking back, Cinder instantly began undoing the knot that Peony had tied around her waist.

“Peony, what are you thinking? These garments are expensive and if she got snagged—if the lining—” Stepping forward, she grabbed the collar of the dress, peeling it off Cinder as soon as the sash was free.

“But you used to let Pearl and me—”

“Things are *different* now, and you are to leave my things alone. Both of you!”

Scowling, Peony started unwrapping her own dress. Cinder bit the inside of her cheek, feeling oddly vulnerable without the heavy silk draped around her and sick to her stomach with guilt, though she wasn’t sure what she had to be guilty about.

“Cinder.”

She dared to meet Adri’s gaze.

“I came to tell you that if you are to be a part of this household, I will expect you to take on some responsibilities. You’re old enough to help Pearl with her chores.”

She nodded, almost eager to have something to do with her time when Peony wasn’t around. “Of course. I don’t want to be any trouble.”

Adri’s mouth pursed into a thin line. “I won’t ask you to do any dusting until I can trust you to move with a bit of grace. Is that hand water resistant?”

Cinder held out her bionic hand, splaying out the fingers. “I...I think so. But it might rust...after a while...”

“Fine, no dishes or scrubbing, then. Can you at least cook?”

Cinder racked her brain, wondering if it could feed her recipes as easily as it fed her useless definitions. "I never have before, that I can remember. But I'm sure..."

Peony threw her arms into the air. "Why don't we just get Iko fixed and then *she* can do all the housework like she's supposed to?"

Adri's eyes smoldered as she looked between her daughter and Cinder. "Well," she said, finally, snatching up the two kimonos and draping them over her arm. "I'm sure we'll be able to find *some use* for you. In the meantime, why don't you leave my daughter alone so she can get some of her schoolwork accomplished?"

"What?" said Peony. "But we haven't even gotten to the ball yet."

Cinder didn't wait to hear the argument she expected to follow. "Yes, stepmother," she murmured, ducking her head. She slipped past Adri and made her way to her own room.

Her insides were writhing but she couldn't pinpoint the overruling emotion. Hot anger, because it wasn't her fault that her new leg was awkward and heavy, and how was she to know Adri wouldn't want them playing in her things?

But also mortification because maybe she really was useless. She was eleven years old, but she didn't know anything, other than the bits of data that seemed to serve no purpose other than to keep her from looking like a complete idiot. If she'd had any skills before, she had no idea what they had been. She'd lost them now.

Sighing, she shut her bedroom door and slumped against it.

The room hadn't changed much in the almost two weeks since she'd come to call it home, other than the cast-off clothes that had been put into the dresser drawers, a pair of boots tossed into a corner, the blankets bundled up in a ball at the foot of her bed.

Her eyes landed on the box of android parts that hadn't been moved from their spot behind the door. The dead

sensor, the spindly arms.

There was a bar code printed on the back of the torso that she hadn't noticed before. She barely noticed it then, except that her distracted brain was searching for the random numbers, downloading the android's make and model information. Parts list. Estimated value. Maintenance and repair manual.

Something familiar stirred inside her, like she already knew this android. How its parts fit together, how its mechanics and programming all functioned as a whole. Or no, this wasn't familiarity, but...a connectedness. Like she knew the android intimately. Like it was an extension of her.

She pushed herself off the door, her skin tingling.

Perhaps she had one useful skill after all.

It took three days, during which she emerged from her room only to sit for meals with her new family and, once, to play in the snow with Peony while Adri and Pearl were at the market. Her metal limbs had frosted over with cold by the time they were done, but coming inside to a pot of green tea and the flush of shared laughter had quickly warmed her back up.

Adri had not asked Cinder to take on any household chores again, and Cinder imagined it seemed a lost cause to her stepmother. She stayed hopeful though, as the jumble of android pieces gradually formed into something recognizable. A hollow plastic body atop wide treads, two skinny arms, a squat head with nothing but a cyclops sensor for a face. The sensor had given her the most trouble and she had to redo the wiring twice, triple-checking the diagram that had downloaded across her eyesight, before she felt confident she'd gotten it right.

If only it worked. If only she could show to Adri, and even Garan, that she wasn't a useless addition to their family

after all. That she was grateful they'd taken her in when no one else would. That she wanted to belong to them.

She was sitting cross-legged on her bed with the window open behind her, allowing in a chilled but pleasant breeze, when she inserted the final touch. The small personality chip clicked into place and Cinder held her breath, half-expecting the android to perk up and swivel around and start talking to her, until she remembered that she would need to be charged before she could function.

Feeling her excitement wane from the anticlimactic finale, Cinder released a slow breath and fell back onto her mattress, mentally exhausted.

A knock thunked against the door.

"Come in," she called, not bothering to move as the door creaked open.

"I was just wondering if you wanted to come watch—" Peony fell silent and Cinder managed to lift her head to see the girl gaping wide-eyed at the android. "Is that...lko?"

Grinning, Cinder braced herself on her elbows. "She still needs to be charged, but I think she'll work."

Jaw still hanging open, Peony crept into the room. Though only nine years old, she was already well over a foot taller than the squat robot. "How...*how*? How did you fix it?"

"I had to borrow some tools from your dad." Cinder gestured to a pile of wrenches and screwdrivers in the corner. She didn't bother to mention that he hadn't been in his workshop behind the house when she'd gone to find them. It almost felt like theft and that thought terrified her, but it wasn't theft. She wasn't going to keep the tools, and she was sure Garan would be delighted when he saw she'd fixed the android.

"That's not..." Peony shook her head and finally looked at Cinder. "You fixed her by yourself?"

Cinder shrugged, not sure whether she should feel proud or uncomfortable at the look Peony was giving her. "It wasn't that hard," she said. "I had...I can download...information."

Instructions. Into my head. And I figured out how to get the android's blueprint to go across my vision so I could..." She trailed off, realizing that what she'd been sure was a most useful skill was also one more strange eccentricity her body could claim. One more side effect of being cyborg.

But Peony's eyes were twinkling. "You're kidding," she said, picking up one of Iko's hands and wagging it around. Cinder had been sure to thoroughly grease it so the joints wouldn't seize up. "What else can you do?"

"Um." Cinder hunched her shoulders, considering. "I can...make stuff louder. I mean, not really, but I can adjust my hearing so it seems louder. Or quieter. I could probably mute my hearing if I wanted to."

Peony laughed. "That's brilliant! You'd never have to hear Mom when she's yelling! Aw, I'm so jealous!" Beaming, she started to drag Iko toward the door. "Come on, there's a charging station in the hallway!"

Cinder hopped off the bed and followed her to a docking station at the end of the hall. Peony plugged Iko in and, instantly, a faint blue light started to glow around the plug.

Peony had raised hopeful eyes to Cinder when the front door opened and Garan stumbled into the hallway, his hair dripping. He wasn't wearing his coat.

He started when he saw the girls standing there. "Peony," he said, short of breath. "Where's your mother?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "In the kitchen, I thi—"

"Go fetch her. Quickly, please."

Peony stalled, her face clouding with worry, before hurrying toward the kitchen.

Intertwining her fingers, Cinder slid in closer to the android. It was the first time she'd been alone with Garan since their long trip and she expected him to say something, to ask how she was getting along or if there was anything she needed—he'd certainly asked that plenty of times while they were traveling—but he hardly seemed to notice her standing there.

"I fixed your android," she said finally, her voice squeaking a little. She grabbed the android's limp arm, as if to prove it, though the hand did nothing but droop.

Garan turned his distraught gaze on her and looked for a moment like he was going to ask who she was and what she was doing in his house. He opened his mouth but it took a long time for any words to form.

"Oh, child."

She frowned at the obvious pity. This was not a reaction she'd expected—he was not impressed, he was not grateful. Thinking he must not have heard her correctly, she went to repeat herself—no, she'd *fixed* the android—when Adri came around the corner, wearing the robe she always wore when she wasn't planning on going out. She had a dish towel in her hand and her two daughters trailing in her wake.

"Garan?"

He stumbled back, slamming his shoulder hard into the wall, and everyone froze.

"Don't—" he stammered, smiling apologetically as a droplet of water fell onto his nose. "I've called for an emergency hover."

The curiosity hardened on Adri's face. "Whatever for?"

Cinder pressed herself as far as she could into the wall, feeling like she was pinned between two people who hadn't the faintest idea she was standing there.

Garan folded his arms, starting to shiver. "I've caught it," he whispered, his eyes beginning to water.

Cinder glanced back at Peony, wondering if these words meant something to her, but no one was paying Cinder any attention.

"I'm sorry," said Garan, coughing. He shuffled back toward the door. "I shouldn't even have come inside. But I had to say...I had to..." He covered his mouth and his entire body shook with a cough, or a sob, Cinder couldn't tell which. "I love you all so much. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

“Garan.” Adri took half a step forward, but her husband was already turning away. The front door shut a second later, and Pearl and Peony cried out at the same time and rushed forward, but Adri caught them both by their arms. “*Garan!* No—you girls, stay here. Both of you.” Her voice was trembling as she pulled them back, before chasing after Garan herself, her night robe swishing against Cinder’s legs as she passed.

Cinder inched forward so she could see the door being swung open around the corner. Her heart thumped like a drum against her ribs.

“GARAN!” Adri screamed, tears in her voice. “What are you—you can’t go!”

Cinder was slammed against the wall as Pearl tore past her, screaming for her father, then Peony, sobbing.

No one paused. No one looked at Cinder or the android in their hurry for the door. Cinder realized after a moment that she was still gripping the android’s skeletal arm, listening. Listening to the sobs and pleas, the *Nos*, the *Daddys*. The words echoed off the snow and back into the house.

Releasing the android, Cinder hobbled forward. She reached the threshold that overlooked the blindingly white world and paused. Adri and Pearl and Peony were on their knees in the cleared pathway, slush soaking into their clothes, while Garan stood on the curb, a forgotten hand still pressed over his mouth. He looked as if the slightest wind would blow him over into the snowdrifts.

Cinder heard sirens.

“What am I supposed to do?” Adri screamed, her arms covered in goose bumps as they gripped her children against her. “What will I do?”

A door slammed and Cinder looked up. The old man across the street was on his doorstep. More neighbors were emerging—at doors and windows, their gazes bright with curiosity.

Adri sobbed louder, and Cinder returned her attention to the family—her new family—and realized that Garan was watching *her*.

She stared back, her throat burning from the cold.

The sirens became louder and Garan glanced down at his huddled wife, his terrified daughters. “My girls,” he said, trying to smile, and then a white hover with flashing lights turned the corner, screaming its arrival.

Cinder ducked back into the doorway as the hover slid up behind Garan and settled into the snow. Two androids rolled out of its side door with a gurney hovering between them. Their yellow sensors flashed.

“A comm was received at 17:04 regarding a victim of letumosis at this address,” said one of the androids in a sterile voice.

“That’s me,” Garan choked—his words instantly drowned out by Adri’s screaming, “NO! Garan! You can’t. You can’t!”

Garan attempted a shaken smile and held out his arm. He rolled up his sleeve and even from her spot on the doorstep Cinder could see two dark spots on his wrist. “I have it. Adri, love, you must take care of the girl.”

Adri pulled back as if he’d struck her. “*The girl?*”

“Pearl, Peony,” Garan continued as if she hadn’t spoken, “be good for your mother. Never forget that I love you so, so very much.” Releasing the hard-won smile, he perched himself uncertainly on the floating gurney.

“Lie back,” said one of the androids. “We will input your identification into our records and alert your family immediately of any changes in your condition.”

“No, Garan!” Adri clambered to her feet, her thin slippers sliding on the ice and nearly sending her onto her face as she struggled to rush after her husband. “You can’t leave me. Not by myself, not with...not with this *thing!*”

Cinder shuddered and wrapped her arms around her waist.

“Please stand back from the letumosis victim,” said one of the androids, positioning itself between Adri and the hover as Garan was lifted into its belly.

“Garan, no! NO!”

Pearl and Peony latched back on to their mother’s sides, both screaming for their father, but perhaps they were too afraid of the androids to go any closer. The androids rolled themselves back up into the hover. The doors shut. The sirens and the lights filled up the quiet suburb before fading slowly away. Adri and her daughters stayed clumped together in the snow, sobbing and clutching each other while the neighbors watched. While Cinder watched, wondering why her eyes stayed so dry—stinging dry—when dread was encompassing her like slush freezing over.

“What’s happened?”

Cinder glanced down. The android had woken up and disconnected herself from the charging station and now stood before her with her sensor faintly glowing.

She’d done it. She’d fixed the android. She’d proven her worth.

But her success was drowned out by their sobs and the memory of the sirens. She couldn’t quite grasp the unfairness of it.

“They took Garan away,” she said, licking her lips. “They called him a letumosis victim.”

A series of clicks echoed inside the android’s body. “Oh, dear...not Garan.”

Cinder barely heard her. In saying the words, she realized that her brain had been downloading information for some time, but she’d been too caught up in everything to realize it. Now dozens of useless bits of information were scrolling across her vision. ***Letumosis, also called the Blue Fever or the Plague, has claimed thousands of lives since the first known victims of the disease died in northern Africa in May of 114 T.E....*** Cinder read faster, scanning until she found the words that she feared, but had

somehow known she would find. ***To date, there have been no known survivors.***

Iko was speaking again and Cinder shook her head to clear it. “—can’t stand to see them cry, especially lovely Peony. Nothing makes an android feel more useless than when a human is crying.”

Finding it suddenly hard to breathe, Cinder deserted the doorway and slumped back against the inside wall, unable to listen to the sobs any longer. “You won’t have to worry about me, then. I don’t think I can cry anymore.” She hesitated. “Maybe I never could.”

“Is that so? How peculiar. Perhaps it’s a programming glitch.”

She stared down into Iko’s single sensor. “A programming glitch.”

“Sure. You have programming, don’t you?” She lifted a spindly arm and gestured toward Cinder’s steel prosthetic. “I have a glitch, too. Sometimes I forget that I’m not human. I don’t think that happens to most androids.”

Cinder gaped down at Iko’s smooth body, beat-up treads, three-fingered prongs, and wondered what it would be like to be stuck in such a body and not know if you were human or robot.

She raised the pad of her finger to the corner of her right eye, searching for wetness that wasn’t there.

“Right. A glitch.” She feigned a nonchalant smile, hoping the android couldn’t detect the grimace that came with it. “Maybe that’s all it is.”



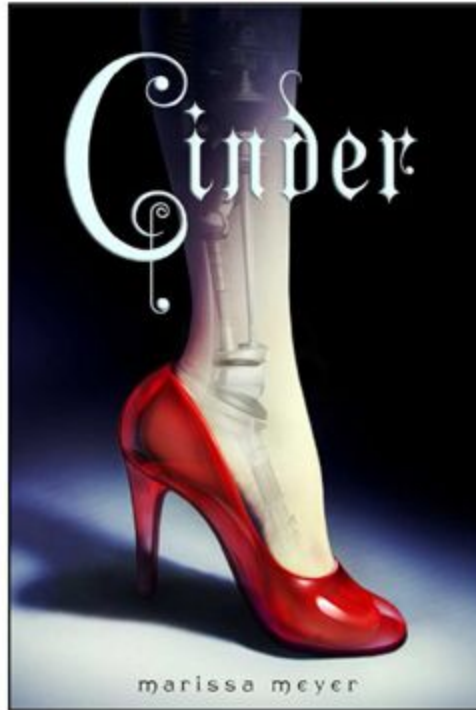
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Cinder

EVEN IN THE FUTURE THE STORY BEGINS WITH
ONCE UPON A TIME . . .



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